



# Fortress



Christopher (*Highlander*) Lambert uses his 'get out of jail free' card in *Fortress*, a cracking new sci-fi actioner set in an Australian prison that makes *Cell Block H* look like a holiday camp. It's due to escape onto video this August, and we managed to track down the film's director, Stuart (*Re-Animator*) Gordon, for this exclusive sneak preview.

**S**tuart Gordon's journey from low-budget horror to big-budget science-fiction was delayed a few years ago, when illness prevented him from directing the Disney hit, *Honey, I Shrunk The Kids*. Since then he has kept busy with projects like *The Pit And The Pendulum*, for Charles Band's Full Moon Entertainment, but the path from cult to mainstream success has continued to elude him. Now, with *Fortress*, his biggest film to date, Gordon seems to be heading in the right direction again.

The futuristic prison escape movie starring Christopher (*Highlander*) Lambert and Gordon regular Jeffrey Combs, has proven a big success in international distribution, and even before its UK release the film has grabbed some \$60 million at the European boxoffice alone. In fact a sequel is already in active preparation, though Gordon is so much in demand now that he probably won't have time to direct it.

On the heels of this success, the talented Gordon is planning a non-genre effort, a comedy entitled *Cops*, as his next directing effort. But horror fans need not despair. His long-cherished HP Lovecraft movie, *Shadow Over Innsmouth*, remains in development, and he is considering an offer to re-team with Brian Yuzna on *Beyond Re-Animator*. Ironically, this director of graphic and gruesome horror found time to discuss his latest film while sitting in an office on the Disney lot, where he has a deal to develop family films!

"*Fortress* was a script sent to me by (producer) John Davis," begins Gordon. "I got to know him a few years back. What happened was that in *Re-Animator* we used Arnold Schwarzenegger's body double, Peter Kent, who played the first re-animated subject. And when the movie was done, he brought Arnold to see it. Arnold liked it so much that he showed it in his home to John Davis. Several years later I got a script sent to me by John. I liked the basic idea - the original concept was by Steve Feinberg and Troy Neighbours. After we had a meeting in December of 1990 I didn't hear from them for several

months, and I just wrote it off.

"Then in May 1991 I got a call from Christopher Lambert, asking me to have lunch and telling me he wanted to play the lead. The script had originally been written for Arnold, and was set up at Fox with a budget of \$50 million. The character was described very much like Arnold - a huge bulldozer of a guy. One of the changes I wanted was to make the hero more vulnerable, more of an everyday man. So the idea of Christopher Lambert playing that part was very appealing to me, and I told him so. The next thing I knew, I was getting a call from



John Davis, saying that Christopher had gone to the Cannes film festival and raised all the money to make the movie.

"It was wonderful. Our budget was \$11 million, which was considerably lower than the script called for, but they knew my background was in low budget films, so they felt comfortable that I would find a way to do it. The only problem was that the movie had to be delivered in one year, which meant that we had to have principal photography completed by Christmas. So it was a real race - we got the go ahead in June and had to be shooting by October. Everything had to go into overdrive immediately. The next thing I knew, I was in Australia shooting the film."

The Australian location wasn't dic-

tated by the script, but by the fact that the film's backers were an Aussie company called Village Roadshow. "They co-own a wonderful facility in Queensland, called Movie World," explains Gordon. "It's like Universal Studios, with huge, state-of-the-art sound stages. They were opening a theme park at the time, and they felt it important to have a movie being shot on one of the stages. So we were one of the attractions. It was funny. While we were shooting, the trams would drive by, loaded up with tourists. But it was great working there."

"We used the largest sound stage, which is enormous. I think the only one that's bigger is the one in England where they did the James Bond movies. We built the largest set in the history of Australian filmmaking, which was a three-storey cell block. In the movie there are about ten of these stacked on top of each other, but we only built one full-size. The rest we did with miniatures."

What appealed to Gordon about the script was it gave him an opportunity to make a statement about the current prison system in the USA. "Something that I had become aware of during the Reagan-Bush administrations was that the policy changed from rehabilitation to punishment. They built all these new prisons and filled them to overflowing and made these places hell on earth, the idea being that a perpetrator is not going to want to go back to one of these places if they make it horrific enough. That really appealed to me."

"You know, I had some problems with the script in that, as I mentioned, you never really worried about the main character, because he was like Arnold Schwarzenegger. It was just a question of when he is going to kill everybody. Also, his crime in the original script was that he had broken a robot - which is not something you could get real emotional about. So the suggestion I made when I came onto the project was to set the movie in an over-populated future, in which having more than one child is a crime - very much like the situation in China. So the only crime this man had committed was wanting to have a baby."

"The story we developed was that



he and his wife had a child who had died, and they thought her tubes had been tied, but she got pregnant again, so they tried to flee the country to have their second child, but ended up getting caught and thrown into the fortress, this maximum security prison, and what is going to be done with the baby is one of the mysteries of this movie.

"In Hollywood, they say that if you have a message, send a telegram. But my feeling is that movies need to be about something, and this was a chance to make a political statement. So it's a political movie disguised as an action picture. The thing I'm finding very heartening now the picture has opened so well in Europe is that audiences seem to be getting the message."

Fortress has the biggest budget of any Stuart Gordon movie to date - almost twice that of *Robot Jox*. This gave him the opportunity to do a lot of things he hadn't been able to do in the past, though he still had to cut a few corners to bring what was originally a \$50 million movie for less than a quarter of that amount.

"It's one of those things," he sighs. "No matter how much you have, you're always trying to stretch every penny to do as much as you possibly can. I feel the film looks bigger than its budget; I'm proud of the way it came out. I was lucky in that I had a terrific crew, starting with a young designer named Simon Merton, who came up with the look of the fortress, and David Eby, the director of photography, and Tim Welburn, the editor.

"There were a few things that had

to go, although we were able to find a way to make most things happen. My mother used to say there's two ways to solve problems: spend money or be smart. We tried to be smart. We found guys who could do wonderful video computer work for almost no money. It was

teamwork there," he enthuses. "The crew is actually smaller than an American crew, because there's a lot of overlapping between departments. You don't have the union problems that can slow you down on American films. There were some wonderful moments



one of those lucky situations where things come together. Also, ideas fed each other. Different departments would come up with something and turn a related department on, who would find a way to better the idea. It grew and improved as it went."

According to the American-born Gordon, working with an Aussie crew was the best experience he's yet had making a film. "There's a real sense of

I remember: we had to protect the cameras from an explosion with sand bags, and everyone ended up moving the sand bags, including the producer, me, the cameraman, and even the nurse on the set. It was something you seldom see in the States.

"Also, people came up with great ideas. One of the things that was baffling us, as far as how to do it, was that the script called for laser bars instead



of regular bars on the cells. The question was how do you do it? If it's an optical, then just about every shot in the movie becomes an optical, and every time you move the camera you have to rotoscope them. We'd still be making the movie now! But David Egby came up with the

ers - I should also mention that we brought in Terry Curtis Fox to help with the script - and visited real prisons. We went to a new high tech prison in Northern California called Pelican Bay and took a lot of pictures and videotape. This place is a super-max security prison

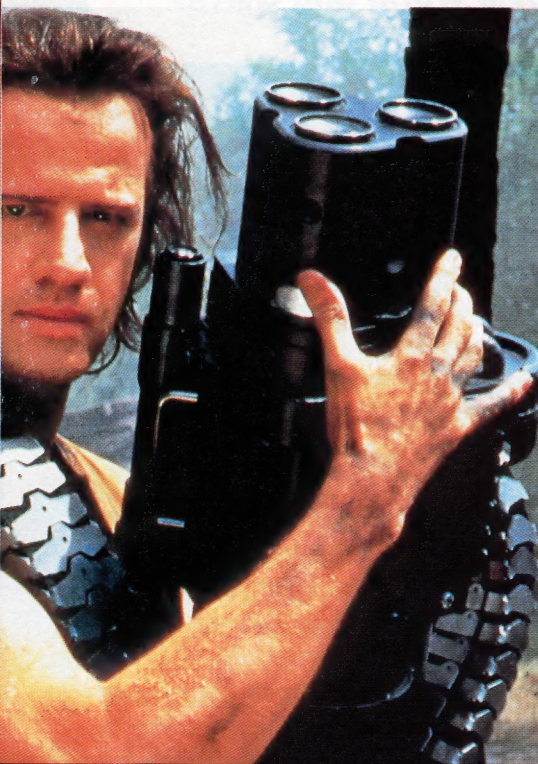
here in the near future. So it was important that there be a basis of reality in everything, including technology and the direction that prisons were moving.

"We found that these new prisons keep the inmates locked up for 22 hours every day in tiny cells, that they use a

lot of video surveillance, and that they're trying to cut down the amount of human contact with the prisoners. So we took all these ideas to their logical conclusion. In *Fortress*, the only human being besides the prisoners is the warden; everything else is automated.

"Some of the devices we created were based on existing things. There's a little toy called an intestinator, which is forced down the throat of every prisoner and lodged in his stomach. If he misbehaves it emits very painful shocks. And if he attempts to escape it can detonate. When we were describing this to the warden of one of the prisons we were investigating, he said 'Sounds great! How soon can I get them?' Unfortunately, it's all true: everything portrayed in this movie exists in some form today. We just extended these things into the future."

Just time for one final question. Does the man who



idea of using Scotchlite bars, which when I first heard of it I couldn't see how it would work. But he did some tests which were stunning, and what was great about it was that it all happened in camera, which meant characters could walk about in front of the bars and we could move the camera. I think that idea alone saved us a million dollars!

"One of the things that helped was that we took the designer and the writ-

where they send the worst 2 percent of the prison population. It's a very frightening place. We had to sign releases when we got there, saying that if we were taken hostage we understood that they would not try to save us. But the look of the prison, the reality of the place, was something that I felt was very important, to make this a believable movie. This doesn't take place in *Star Wars* times - far, far away; it's happening

made *Re-Animator* plan to seek out other sci-fi projects like *Fortress*, or will he return to the horror genre? "I'd like to do other things as well," he concludes. "The fact is that I'm getting a lot of action scripts now, and people are starting to realise I was instrumental in writing *Honey, I Shrunk The Kids*, so I'm getting a lot of things sent to me that are family films - which is a fun break from exploding heads!"